DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 772 CS 012 130

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TITLE The Importance of Functional Literacy Skills in a Changing World.
PUB DATE Oct 94
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Pedagogy and School Innovation (Tartu, Estonia, October 21-22, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Functional Literacy; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Attitudes; Reading Difficulties; Reading Research; Reading Skills; *Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Sweden

ABSTRACT

A study investigated Swedish students' attitudes about the point of being able to read. Subjects were 53 Swedish students in grades 5 and 8. Their answers were distributed into three categories: a survival and participation perspective; a dynamic-instrumental perspective; and a personal experience perspective. Regardless of performance level, most students had a rather practical view of literacy skills. They believed that reading is a skill that is difficult to do without. Several of the skilled readers felt sorry for those less fortunate than themselves, but some of them took a somewhat normative stance. By grade 8, many of the poor readers have given up acquiring reading skills. The school system has great responsibility in helping as many students as possible to acquire functional literacy skills. Educators should not stop trying, although it seems that about 10% of the Swedish population do not reach a functional literacy level. (RS)

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ED 381 772

The importance of functional literacy skills in a changing world

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Paper presented at the conference Pedagogy and School Innovation at Tartu University, Estonia, 21-22 October 1994

What is the point of being able to read? This was one of the questions that I gave to 53 Swedish students in grades 5 and 8 (Persson: Reading for Understanding, 1994) The answers were distributed into the following categories:

A. A survival and participation perspective: to be able to survive or take part in today's society

B. A dynamic-instrumental perspective: to learn things and get a good education (and a good job)

C. A personal experience perspective: to surpass time and space

Regadless of performance level most students seem to have a rather practival view of literacy skills: you need to be able to read and write so that you can take care of yourself, your rights and responsibilities as a good citizen, in other words to meet the demands of your environment Only a few of the most skilled readers expressed a view that was of a more personal nature: by reading and writing you can communicate with others without actually meeting them, and you can experience events that happened long time ago or in foreign places.

The students mentioned several examples of what they refer to:

A. Survival and participation perspective:
road-signs, labels, posters, announcements, time-tables, instructions, newspapers, subtitles on TV, etc

B. Dynamic-instrumental perspective:
to learn about the world and know what goes on, so that you can travel, continue your education, get a good job, "be somebody"....

C. Personal experience perspective:
to write and read letters, find out about things when you are curious, get away from here and now, fantasize, move into the story, etc

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When asked about what they thought it would be like not being able to read, the students brought out the following: a *practical/survival* aspect, an *informational/educational* aspect, and an *emotional* aspect. Here are some examples:

Practical aspect:
Then I couldn't lead a normal life, I would have to go live in the forrest or something.
You wouldn't be able to get a job.

Educational aspect:
You wouldn't be able to learn anything.
I wouldn't be able to do my homework.

Emotional aspect:
I wouldn't be able to tell anyone about it.
Not being able to read is a handicap. If you don't know anything about what goes on. ... I mean, just sit there and listen to your Dad reading his newspaper ... that's no fun. It's better to be able to read it yourself. So, it's like being deaf or blind almost ... yes, blind is more like it.

In other words, reading is a skill that it is difficult to do without, the way elementary school students see it, a skill which is more or less taken for granted. The environment demands that students learn to read in school. And most students do learn to read and write during their first years in school, some can even read when they first enter school at the age of 7.

What drives them to learn? When my son was 5 years old he said: "Show me how to read!" When I asked why he replied: "If I can read myself you don't have to read out loud what the foreigners are saying on TV." On Sweden TV foreign programmes are usually not dubbed - instead the translation is shown in a strip on the TV-screen. This has proved to be an important criterium for functional reading ability, and one of the motivating factors for learning to read. Among pre-school children in a study by Dahlgren & Olsson ("Reading from children's perspective", 1985) two general purposes for learning to read were found; because of requirements from the environment, or because of the possibilities inherent in the reading skills. After one year in school the requirements category is more dominant, there are so many "musts" about reading in school, and in the higher grades most of the studying is supposed to be done independently by each student.

The requirements from environment may have a detrimental effect on students with language problems, when they are too high or appear too early. One of the students in my study, a grade 8 student with reading problems, told me how he learned to read when he first went to school:

It was difficult. I had fever attacks with cramps when I was little, so I had to do a lot of exercises at home. My Dad helped me a lot, and my Mom. They used to sit with me and try.... but then Dad got angry, because he wanted me to learn. He only wanted the best for me. I have no confidence.. Maybe I know how to.... but sometimes I make mistakes and I may use other alternatives. (8P)

With age the students get more and more aware of how well they cope with their learning tasks. Those who are poor readers are also poor students in general, and they regard themsleves as such. So, what do they think about people who cannot read? A sample of answers:

they are not very smart
they are just bad at school
it's just too bad if they didn't learn at school
it depends on what kind of a person it is - some of them *are* stupid
it depends on whether they make an effort or not
they are no different from others, only they can't read
feel sorry for them

In general, it can be said that several of the skilled readers feel sorry for those less fortunate than themselves, but, on the other hand, some of them take a somewhat normative stance

• That varies.... Some who take reading for granted, think that they are barmy, but some people understand that being able to read is not self-evident to everyone. Some have learning problems, others have nothing to read. Those who know that feel sorry for them.

• I think it differs from one person to the next... For some it may be that it seems that they don't want to learn, they are lazy and just don't give a damn. Others you may feel sorry for, because they try but it doesn't work. Because there are some who really try, and you can feel sorry for them..... It's really unfair, I mean if you try and try and it still doesn't work.

• It depends on what kind of people they are. If the case is that they don't have any money to go to school, then I feel sorry for them. But if they just don't want to go to school and learn, then they are silly. At least they could finish 9th grade and then stop.

• They are to be pitied, because you think it's a bit strange, when you yourself don't have any problems in learning... Strange and hard... that they can't learn.

• I feel sorry for them. They can't help that they have problems with reading. (*So, what do you think should be done about it?*) It depends on what they themselves want. In class I think the teacher should let them read more, study Swedish more.

• I don't think there's anything wrong with that, it all depends..... Maybe someone doesn't want to learn to read... I mean, one has to respect them for that. We all have different personalities, you can't force anyone to do something. But of course, if they don't get any opportunities, they don't value less than others, at least that's what I think. After all, there are other ways to communicate.

Those who have or have had problems themselves, of course, know what it means:

• I think it's a big problem to them. Since I've had such problems myself I know what it's like.

• I feel sorry for them, because I know myself what it feels like.

• Don't know what to say about that...But I myself think it's hard. I had reading problems myself when I was in grade 4. I went to a special teacher. I had a friend there, too, but I was better than him at reading, so it was kind of difficult when he was reading, when he stumbled on every word, almost.

Overall, the necessity of being able to read seems to be obvious to all students in my study, whereas the joy of reading is much less obvious to those who have difficulties. They seldom read a book out of their own choice, because they rarely finish their compulsory assignments in time for the "free choice section" at school. At home they are too tired when they have finished their homework to read something else. They read when they are required to, which means that

they get less experience with different reading materials
they need help with unfamiliar texts
they become dependent on others for learning new material
they do not acquire critical reading skills
they get less interested in reading for pleasure, etc.

The students know that reading skills are necessary for them to be able to take care of their democratic rights and responsibilities. In grade 5 they still hope to acquire these skills, in grade 8 the poor readers have given up. Very few of them are confident enough to have some plans for the future. They have grown into a society where demands on reading and writing skills are increasing and changing, due to computer technology, television and other electronic communication devices. We are so encircled by written information that we do not even think about it I eat breakfast looking through the morning newspaper, a sheet of paper in my letter-box informs me that a repairman needs access to my flat tomorrow, there is a new poster at the bus-stop advertising a miracle medicine for rough skin, a sign outside the door tells me that the road is blocked this afternoon, leaving all the reading and writing I am doing at work. When I get back home there is a letter from some authority that I have to answer, my voting card that tells me where to go to vote in the general election, and a lot of information about who to vote for and why, there is information from the "Yes-side" and the "No-side" in the referendum about Sweden joining the European Community or not, and so on. Although some of this information can be received via television, it is in that case most unstable and I cannot return to it easily. Often it calls for some literary action on my part - that I write something or respond in such a way so as to demonstrate that I have understood the message. In addition to reading the alphabet I also have to be able to decipher symbols that are connected with the new technology.

Those who cannot read and write are easily manipulated in a world full of language signs. Elementary school students know this:

If I couldn't read I would be fooled into all sorts of things

The school has great responsibility in helping as many students as possible to acquire functional literacy skills. There will always be those who fall behind, and in almost every industrialised society it seems that about 10 per cent of the population do not reach a functional literacy level, something that should not stop us from trying.